Public engagement in global context
Understanding the UK shift towards dialogue and deliberation

Oliver Escobar

Queen Margaret University

EDINBURGH

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Oliver Escobar
Centre for Dialogue[1] (Queen Margaret University)

Introduction

This paper attempts to contextualise the public engagement agenda in the UK. It is an introductory review of literature on citizen participation, deliberative democracy and dialogue studies, as well as of key policy statements and initiatives globally and in the UK.

Let me explain the motivation behind this simplified synthesis of such a vast field. The more I speak to public engagement practitioners the more I realise that there is a remarkable disconnection between different areas of practice. For instance, those who work in the area of science public engagement often ignore the wealth of expertise available in other fields (i.e. local community engagement). Those who work in community engagement, for instance, ignore what researchers and practitioners of deliberative democracy are doing. You get the picture; there is a remarkable disconnection between fields that could work in synergy. This situation creates missed opportunities. Public engagement practitioners face similar challenges and often struggle without knowing that sometimes they may be trying to reinvent the wheel. For instance, science engagement practitioners currently face normative dilemmas that have been already addressed by deliberative scholars (i.e. inclusion; legitimacy).

Accordingly, this review introduces the broad context of public engagement by outlining key theoretical debates, as well as drawing global and UK trends in terms of policy ad practice. It should serve as an invitation to further reading (thus the exhaustive referencing), but also as a quick introduction that connects diverse areas of public engagement, inscribing them into their wider context, namely, democratic practice in the 21st century.

Key words: public engagement; dialogue and deliberation; deliberative democracy; citizen participation; UK; Scotland.

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[1] For info on QMU's *Dialogue Research Project* check: http://oliversdialogue.wordpress.com/challenging-communication.

1. Democratizing democracy: dialogue, deliberation and governance

The discussion over the virtues and pitfalls of participatory democracy can be traced back to ancient Athens. Although the scale and implications of the matter have changed, the core normative and practical issues remain a constant: legitimacy, inclusion, competency and collective intelligence. It will soon be a century since this classic theme was reformulated in contemporary terms through the intense debate between Walter Lippman and John Dewey (Kadlec, 2007). In simple terms, there are two questions at stake; what should be the role of the citizenry in the policy making process? And how to embody such role in cultural, institutional and operational terms?

The answer seems straightforward from a conventional notion of liberal representative democracy. An electoral system embedded in constitutional guarantees is, in this view, the best way of aggregating the socio-political preferences of the citizens (Fung, 2008:671-673; Dryzek et al. 2008:15). The challenge, subsequently, is to stimulate citizens' participation in party politics and electoral processes. On the other hand, many have argued that the dynamics of party politics in media societies is precisely a key driver for such low levels of civic engagement (i.e. Clarke 2002:13-20; POWER 2006). In addition, the rapid intensification of social complexity, coupled with the consolidation of new hierarchies of knowledge and professional expertise, contribute to intensify deeper and more subtle levels of democratic deficit (Fischer, 2009). Finally, the work of Putnam (2001) has also thrown into relief the substantial deterioration of the relational fabric of many communities, a factor that seems to hinder the development of a more politically vibrant public sphere.

As a response, the demand for direct citizen participation in policy and decision making has grown steadily for the last three decades (Roberts, 2004), making the case for the opening of new participative spaces capable of revitalizing the public sphere. Although problematic in ways which will not be explored here, many political scientists postulate that deliberative citizen participation can complement and strengthen representative systems (i.e. Fischer 2000:37; Fung 2008; Dryzek 2009b). Political theory has shifted the focus accordingly, leaving behind the debate between liberals and communitarians, and moving on to deal with newly emerging areas with a more pragmatic orientation (Dryzek et al. 2008:18-9).

It is difficult to overstate the impact that the work of Habermas (1986, 1989) has had in bringing the communicative dimension of participatory democracy to the forefront of social and political science. Two particular streams of work are relevant for the purposes of this paper. In the first place, deliberative scholarship, ranging from political theory to policy analysis, represents one of the most important developments in the democratic theory of the last decades. In the second place, dialogue scholarship, rooted in communication studies,

has been gaining momentum towards the beginning of the millennia. The terms dialogue and deliberation[2], although characterized by different traditions, principles and practices (see Escobar, 2009), have come to be used interchangeably[3] as part of the pool of discursive resources that underpins the rhetoric of public engagement.

As we will see in this paper, public dialogue, rather than deliberation, is the preferred term in British political rhetoric. However, we will not address here questions of definition or taxonomy, but a series of emergent discourses that, as we will later argue, are reshaping the rhetorical landscape of public policy making. In order to understand this process it is necessary to place it in a broader context.

The "dialogue revival" in democratic societies (Linder 2001) can be understood as a response to two interrelated social and institutional challenges: the dependence on collective intelligence and the need for public legitimacy that encompasses trust and compliance.

In the first place, public dialogue is expected to foster social intelligence capable of bearing on the wicked problems that confront our societies. This does not only refer to the co-creation of practical solutions by citizens, policy makers and everyone in between (capability and viability), but also to the co-production of normative public reasons (acceptability). As Dewey (1991:219) puts it, "we lie […] in the lap of an immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium".

In the second place, inclusive public dialogue can help to infuse legitimacy into the policy making process (see Innes & Booher 2003; Fischer 2003:206; Dryzek 2009b). It does so, according to its advocates, by producing "better decisions" and hence a "stronger democracy" (Clarke, 2002). This argument is not only a corollary of the need for social intelligence, but an attempt to counteract the democratic deficit that, coupled with public mistrust, threatens the perceived legitimacy of the institutional system. Far from being a theoretical threat to its normative foundations, it constitutes a practical threat to its functional basis. In other words, the implementation of policy requires public compliance and

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[2] Oversimplifying the vast body of scholarship that underpins both concepts, the fundamental distinction between dialogue and deliberation is that the former focuses on reciprocal understanding and relationship building, whereas the latter is geared towards debating alternatives and reaching conclusions or decisions. Dialogue and deliberation are far from being clear-cut discursive practices. In reality, interpersonal communication unfolds in all sorts of hybrid forms. For further discussions see Escobar (2009).

[3] As an example: "Deliberative processes work. A deliberative process, when well structured, professionally facilitated and supported with factual and easily understood information, works to create a dialogue. Dialogue differs from debate; dialogue encourages reflection and learning, promotes a focus on common ground, and allows new ideas to emerge." (OECD, 2001:101)

collaboration, and hence "the achievement of policy goals is tied to strengthening the role of civic society as a critical dialogue partner with the state" (Chambers & Kopstein 2008:370).

Both of these challenges have been nicely captured in the conceptual shift from government to governance. Despite its critics (see Offe 2009), the concept of governance is used in political theory (Chambers & Kopstein 2008) and in deliberative policy analysis (Fischer 2009; Hajer & Wagenaar 2003) to transcend the traditional government-centred understanding of contemporary policy making. The term governance seems to be more flexible in order to encapsulate current dynamics of collaborative policy making that depend on deliberative interaction across overlapping socio-political networks. In this sense, the concept has evolved "to identify and explain new spaces for participatory decision-making and accompanying modes of citizen-solving problem that fill gaps created by the failure of traditional approaches" (Fischer 2009:68).

As we have seen, public dialogue and deliberation, citizen participation and collaborative policy making have generated and reshaped vast areas of scholarship. However, some of the arguments outlined above have recently started to be disputed by multidisciplinary empirical work.

For instance, Sustein (2006) has contested the notion that collective thinking through deliberation produces better social intelligence on emotionally charged issues. On the contrary, in some cases deliberation might radicalise the polarisation of views and even the reduction of internal diversity on both sides of the argument (p.46). As a response, dialogue scholars would argue here that that is a consequence of some deliberation formats that are geared towards adversarial debate underpinned by confrontational communication (Isaacs 1999; Tannen 1998; Anderson et al 2004; Pearce & Pearce 2001, 2004; Littlejohn & Domenici 2001; Hyde & Bineham 2001).

Mutz (2007) has posed another remarkable challenge to the underlying assumptions of deliberative democracy. It is generally taken for granted that more citizen participation in the public sphere will necessarily increase the practice of dialogue and deliberation (D+D). In D+D processes people is exposed to diverse points of view that often put into question their own perspectives and values. Mutz's research offers a range of consistent findings that show that "cross-cutting exposure discourages political participation" (p. 114). In other words, citizens are keener to participate in initiatives that involve like-minded individuals, and therefore the prospect of engaging in agonistic deliberation may deter them from wanting to participate.

All in all, D+D studies are now in the phase of empirically addressing their weaknesses in terms of sociological and psychological foundations (see Ryfe 2007; Rosemberg 2005, 2007). This new wave of critics has added important arguments to previous critique of deliberative democracy by the scholars of *difference* (see Dryzek, 2002). Such work had already pointed out the problems encountered in deliberative processes on the ground, namely, issues of inclusion (i.e. socio-economic inequality, hierarchies of knowledge, problems of competency, self-efficacy and agency, unequal discursive resources and communication barriers). This has contributed to criticism of deliberation as an elitist practice (Young, 2002), a portrayal that is perhaps reinforced by the general perception that 'deliberation' refers to a formal process that takes place in parliaments, committees and court rooms. In that sense, the label 'dialogue' seems to convey more positive connotations (Deetz & Simpson, 2004), which may in part explain why the term in increasingly favoured in British public discourse.

All in all, the critique has not slowed down the advance of these interrelated disciplines. On the contrary, it has strengthened the view that it is necessary to set up a more exhaustive empirical research agenda. The joint effort by deliberative scholars (i.e. Bohman 1996; Gutmann & Thompson 1996, 2004; Dryzek 2002; Gastil 2008) and their critics (i.e. Young 1996, 1999, 2002; Sanders 1997, Mutz 2007) has recently moved the discipline on from its normative groundwork to its "working theory stage" (Chambers 2003:307). Of course, this would have been impossible were it not for the sheer parallel development of all sorts of deliberative experiments on the ground.

2. Walking the talk: D+D across the globe

Participation has been a long-standing concept in international development studies (Cornwall 2002; Gaventa 2004, 2006) that have documented a wide range of both bottom-up and top-down approaches to community building across the world (Cornwall 2008). Some accounts offered by participatory scholars are encouraging and strive towards proposing critical frameworks for moving participatory practice forward (i.e. Fung & Wright 2001, Cornwall 2008). However, critical voices have also pointed out how "participatory projects can easily be co-opted by powerful institutions for their own ends" (Fischer 2009:73; see also Fischer 2006). The efforts of the World Bank in this terrain are well known. The policy document "The World Bank and participation" (World Bank 1994) is steeped in the participatory rhetoric that had proven relevant in the work of NGOs in developing countries in previous decades. It collects the experience of the participatory projects set up by World Bank in thirty countries in the early 1990s. However, as Fischer (2009:73-4) points out,

reports from the field highlight the disingenuous, if not manipulative, nature of many of such efforts.

Having said that, a review of relevant literature offers a richer picture of the progress made by participatory and "deliberative activism" around the globe (Fung 2005:416). Let us take a five-paragraph worldwide tour in order to provide a snapshot of the field before we return to Britain.

Two well-known landmarks of South American work on participatory democracy come from Brazil. The first one is the work of Paulo Freire, which spanned across four decades, and continues to flourish in initiatives from followers worldwide. Freire (1996) developed the practice of dialogue as a means for social transformation through the educational empowerment of impoverished communities. The second landmark is the deliberative practice of participatory budgeting (see Nylen 2003; Shah 2007). Participatory budgeting formats give citizens the power to discuss and decide how to spend public money. Far from fading away, the practice of participatory budgeting is extending internationally, with countries like Bolivia, Brazil or India passing national legislation mandating public participation in planning and budgeting (Fischer, 2009:75). In Britain, participatory budgeting is currently used in more than 20 local authorities, and the Government has set out to "encourage every local authority to use such schemes in some form by 2012" (CLG 2008:5).

On the other side of the planet, India and China seem to be going through a similar deliberative turn (Wilsdon et al. 2005:59; Cornwall 2008). The case of India is particularly interesting in terms of innovative governance through the creation of bottom-up inclusive and imaginative formats for deliberative practice in regions like Kerala (Fischer 2006). If we continue the journey to the south east, we will find, for instance, public dialogue processes created to inform biotechnology policy making in New Zealand (Roper et al. 2004), or the Australian Citizens' Parliament, "a world first" (Dryzek 2009:1).

Back to America, if we look north, the amount of activity seems colossal. There are at least 30 organisations that specialise in promoting and implementing projects that expand the "practice of deliberative democracy" in the USA (Ryfe 2002:361). Some of the better known are the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (http://www.thataway.org), the Public Conversations Project (Herzig & Chasin 2006), the Public Dialogue Consortium (see Spano 2001, Pearce & Pearce 2001), America Speaks (http://www.americaspeaks.org), World Café (Brown et al., 2005), Let's Talk America (www.letstalkamerica.org), National Issues Forums (NIF 2003), and The Jefferson Centre (TJC 2004). Deliberative activity ranges from all sorts of participatory policy making to diverse forums for community building through dialogue and

deliberation (see for instance Innes and Booher 2003, Spano 2001, Leighninger 2006; Helling and Thomas 2001).

Canada is also a leading beacon. For instance, the work of the Wosk Centre for Dialogue (http://www.sfu.ca/dialog) has become a common reference as a venue and formalised training hub for dialogue. Another referent comes from the projects and policy making guidelines promoted by the Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPD 2000). Finally, in terms of unique governance innovation, we must mention the groundbreaking work of the Bristish Columbia Citizens' assembly, charged with the task of redesigning the electoral system in an unprecedented constitutional reform through deliberative methods (see Warren & Pearse 2008).

Deliberative experiments, such as "consensus conferences", have also proliferated in Europe (Fischer 2009:93-7) and organisations like the OECD (2003) have documented this new mood for participation across entire European regions. Indeed, judging by the constant reference to OECD reports in British policy documents and pamphlets, it can be argued that the OECD has had a notable influence in contributing to the British rhetoric of public engagement. For the remainder of this section we will take a brief look at those reports.

In 2001, following an international survey, the OCDE acknowledged that many countries were looking for new ways of involving citizens in policy making, although practice on the ground was reduced to "a few pilot cases" (OECD 2001:12). Both the "Citizens as partners" report and the handbook (OECD 2001, 2001b) critically document best practice, offer practical examples, guidelines and tools, and advocate "egalitarian" (p.23) "public dialogue on policy issues and options" (p.22). The arguments for policy dialogue as an institutionalised practice is that it contributes to "raise the quality of policies by gaining access to new sources of information", raise "the chances for successful implementation", "reinforce the legitimacy of the decision-making process", increase "voluntary compliance", and increase "new forms of partnership" (OECD 2001:22). It defines active participation as

> a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in defining the process and content of policy making. It acknowledges equal standing for citizens in setting the agenda, proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue. (OECD 2001:12)

Besides extensive reports and handbooks, the OECD also provided policy briefs that outline clear principles and vocabularies to assist policy makers in "building legal, policy and institutional frameworks" in order to move towards the "new frontier" of citizen participation (OECD 2001c). In the forthcoming years the OECD continued to provide policy briefs, reports, and manuals (OECD 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2008) presenting case studies,

championing best practice, and criticising the rhetorical use of dialogue as a "cosmetic exercise" (OECD 2003a:49).

A number of think tanks and third sector organisations have made a consistent effort to bring this international wealth of experience to Britain. Clear examples have been the case studies and compilations of techniques included in "Participation works!" (NEF 1998), or "Beyond the ballot. 57 Democratic innovations from around the world" (Smith 2005). It has been not only a process of importation of ideas, but also of training expertise. Indeed, there are a number of networks and expert organisations whose services cut across the globe. The best example is perhaps IAP2 (International Association for Public Participation). IAP2 has been in operation since the mid 1990s, offering structured training programs and awarding a range of "Certificates in Public Participation" (IAP2 2006). Its courses in Britain are taught by expert consultants that operate as associates[4].

Ranging from institutional to civic initiatives, and from small to large-scale projects, the discourse of citizen participation, as we have seen, can be easily traced around the globe. In the case of the UK, the current fashion for pubic dialogue has often been framed as a part of the rhetoric of the New Labour era, starting in 1997 (Clarke 2002; Barnes et. al 2007).

3. Public Engagement in Britain

The label 'public engagement' often operates as a catchall term used in reference to practices as diverse as information giving, dissemination, consultation, public dialogue and deliberation, or collaborative policymaking. There are three policy areas where the discourse of public engagement has emerged most prominently since New Labour took power in 1997; namely, NHS, local governance and science and technology.

Some fascinating deliberative activities and discourses are emerging in the area of science and technology policy, which we have addressed in more detail elsewhere (see Pieczka and Escobar 2010). What makes this area so interesting is the problematic intersection between, firstly, specialised knowledge and expertise, and ethical and moral considerations; secondly, economic drivers and democratic ideals; and finally, policy discourses and discursive practices.

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[4] "In the UK, over 30 organisations have benefited from undertaking the IAP2 training, and over 170 individuals have undertaken at least part of the IAP2 Certificate, including the Scottish Executive, Communities Scotland, East Ayrshire Council, NHS Ayrshire & Arran, North Ayrshire Council, Glasgow Community Planning Ltd, the Environment Agency, Department for Transport, Department for Communities and Local Government, Department of Educational and Social Services, Metropolitan Police Authority, various primary care trusts and other health and education providers." (Hilton Associates 2009)

At local level, participatory processes have been used in two broad areas: community building and local planning (see examples in Involve 2005; NEF 1998; Barnes et al. 2007). According to Clarke (2002:47) some of the best public engagement practice in Britain was already taking place at local level since the early 1990s. This, in Clarke's early evaluation of New Labour's work, was in stark contrast with Whitehall activity, where citizens where often framed as *users* of public services:

> The rhetoric of citizenship and a reinvigorated democracy will not be achieved while the involvement processes and, increasingly, language are so narrowly focussed. Where there has been progress, for example, on the Code of Practice on Written consultation, there is a need to see this as a first step […] central government needs to take on board the local experience of deliberative processes and experiment with it more fully. There is also a need to develop a more strategic approach across central government and within departments. Again, local government can point the way. (Clarke 2002:50; see a similar evaluation in IPPR 2005))

However, the Government did not seem to take such an optimistic view on what was happening at local level in terms of public engagement. In 2002 the Department for Communities and Local Government published the report "Guidance on enhancing public participation" (DCLG 2002), where it tries to offer "a more systematic approach to participation within local authorities" and asks local authorities "to step back and examine strategic issues and the overall impact of participation" (p.4). Simultaneously, the Cabinet Office (2002) produced "Viewfinder. A policy maker's guide to public involvement", where it offers the rationale and framework for improving citizen engagement at different stages of the policy making process. It also emphasises capacity building, and provides definitions and participatory techniques, encouraging local authorities to embed deliberative methods as part of their policy making culture. One of the strongest policy statements in this direction will come in the form of a White Paper in 2008. "Communities in control: real people, real power" (CLG 2008) encapsulates the master narratives of New Labour in terms of community empowerment and citizen participation. In an act of perhaps unintended plagiarism, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, introduces the paper with a twist of Dewey's famous quote: "Democracy is not about a cross in a box every five years, but about a way of life" (CLG 2008:iii). The White Paper acknowledges some of the "important changes in our participatory democracy", for instance initiatives of participatory budgeting (p.5), the extensive use of citizens' juries (p.vi), or the regeneration programmes of the New Deal for Communities (p.1). It also recognises that there is still need for more reform in the face of a "growing detachment with formal political mechanisms" and public scepticism around the impact that participation actually has in policy making (p.2).

Overall, the Paper offers an apparently unproblematic rhetorical blend of both liberal and communitarian arguments; for instance:

> We want to shift power, influence and responsibility away from existing centres of power into the hands of communities and individual citizens. This is because we believe that they can take difficult decisions and solve complex problems for themselves (CLG 2008:1)

The NHS is another policy area where the discourse of public engagement has emerged strongly since 1997 (Barnes et al. 2007; Lawson 2008). Two policy documents are good testimony of this: *The NHS improvement plan* (DH 2004) and *Real involvement* (DH 2008). The first one is built around a conventional notion of involving through the "statutory duty" of consultation (DH 2004:78). The second expands that notion by providing guidance on deliberative methods and stressing the need to "develop an ongoing dialogue or relationship with the community […] and build trust and confidence" (DH 2008:50).

A few points are relevant with regard to how these discourses have developed in Scotland. In 1999 the Scottish Executive launched a £3 million initiative, "Listening to communities" (Clarke 2002:35), which marks the beginning of a consistent replication of the discourses outlined above. Labour governments in Scotland tapped into Whitehall's pool of rhetorical resources, and so they established guidance on engagement (Scottish Executive 2003), evaluated the use of participatory and deliberative methods (Stevenson et al., 2004), set up "National standards for community engagement" (Communities Scotland, 2005c), and brought home international experience to make the point that "dialogue at grassroots level is a necessary condition for holding effective dialogue at national level" (Nicholson 2005:42).

 Along the way we discovered that citizens were frustrated by the lack of impact of their participation in policy making (Scottish Executive 2004:43; Hope and King 2005:2). However, the engagement ethos seemed to resonate well in a country where roughly half of the population "had been actively involved in some form of community or voluntary organisation" (Hope and King 2005:1). Interestingly enough, the same survey revealed that 87% would not like to be involved in policy making (Ibid.). An evaluation of the impact of the "National standards" points out that they have provided "a shared language and consistent understanding of […] community engagement which did not exist before" (Scottish Goverment 2008:27). Indeed, the "standards" discourse has been endorsed by "public and voluntary sector, […] COSLA, NHS Health Scotland, Association of Chief Police Officers […] and others" (Scottish Government 2008:1). There is no overall change in rhetoric with the arrival of the SNP to power in 2007, although a couple of points are worth noting. Their

programme (Scottish Government 2008b) commits them to "a continuing dialogue with the people of Scotland", through the use of

> tried and tested consultation techniques and […] innovative work in […] a genuine National Conversation on options for Scotland's institutional future - […] the central public engagement commitment of this Government on the central issue for our country. (Scottish Government 2008b:34)

A comprehensive community empowerment plan was launched recently (Scottish Government 2009). The dominant language here is that of capacity building, user participation, and service delivery. The plan takes the community as its unit, steering away from the rhetoric of the individual deliberative citizen; furthermore, the word 'citizen' is not mentioned even once in the entire document. Mediated, rather than direct, participation is the preferred framework. Accordingly, dialogue between Government and communities is to occur through partnerships, third sector organisations and civic groups. This turns the focus away from the early deliberative and participatory experimentation with people's panels, citizen juries, participatory planning and so on (Mahendran and Cook, 2007:23-24) and seems to reinforce the more managerialistic and consumerist language of stakeholders, service providers and users. This "managerialisation of local politics" has been a UK-wide long-standing discursive trend that has remained in tension with the democratic civic renewal agenda (Barnet et al. 2007:22).

Final remarks

When observers with an international perspective take stock of the outcomes of the policy drive for public engagement in the UK in the last decade the conclusions are less than satisfactory (see Cornwall, 2008). While they acknowledge the dissemination of the rhetorical arsenal deployed by New Labour and its networks, they criticise its bureaucratic tone and reflect an overall failure in achieving higher level of participation in policy making (see Bartlett's foreword in Cornwall 2008; see also POWER 2006).

If we follow the OECD taxonomy of public engagement (information, consultation, participation) it seems that the first two have become integral parts of a systematic approach to policy making in Britain (i.e. the "duty to consult" in NHS). Reality is somewhat different when it comes to public dialogue and deliberation. Participatory processes have been in operation in Britain at least since the 1990s, but their use to inform policy making has been mainly sporadic (NHS 2008:10) and, in many cases, disappointing (Involve, 2005:11-15).

However, this uncoordinated approach seems to be prevalent across OECD countries, where there are "many initiatives, no strategic overview" (OECD, 2008). Observers like Cornwall (2008:19:32-3) argue that the problem is cultural rather than institutional. In a nutshell: the proliferation of "invited spaces" (top-down initiatives where citizens are 'invited' to participation organised by institutional agents) may prove to be counterproductive in terms of fostering a culture of active citizen participation.

All in all, the rhetoric on public dialogue in the UK has evolved alongside newly expanded practices of networked governance. Like any good rhetorical resource, 'public dialogue' is a flexible term that conveys many meanings, and in doing so, it increases the 'pragmatic ambiguity'[5] of the concept (Giroux 2006:1232). Pragmatic ambiguity is a rhetorical device that enables the adaptation of broad discourses to the specific needs of practitioners in situated contexts. It means that the flexibility and indeterminacy of a concept enables people's own interpretation and adaptation of the concept to their own specific scenarios. The vagueness and ambiguity of the concept of public dialogue adopted in British Government policy statements has contributed to insert the term in the vocabulary of multiple actors in public policy making. However, this ambiguity has also made it difficult to assess how theories of public dialogue and participation are actually being translated into practice in the UK. Our research agenda in the next few years should ensure that democratic practice –as it happens on the ground- is feeding back into theoretical models of participatory and deliberative democracy.

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[5] Also called 'interpretive viability' by Benders & van Veen (2001:37).

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